



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Feature Release: May 9, 1994

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HOME AWAY FROM HOME...
PIPING PLOVERS HEAD NORTH TO NEST IN CANADA AND THE U.S.

Every year hundreds of piping plovers make the journey from Texas through the Dakotas to breeding grounds in Prairie Canada and on the southern shores of the Great Lakes. Others head up the Atlantic Coast from the Caribbean and South Carolina to nest on beaches from Virginia to Newfoundland. Their search for nesting habitat has been aided by the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, an international agreement between Canada and the United States (soon to include Mexico). The Plan not only benefits waterfowl but also helps piping plovers and other shorebirds and endangered species that share wetland habitats.

On the Canadian prairies, winter is a defiant season. Sometimes in early April winter still has its icy grip on the province, but by month's end the battle is over and the season of renewal begins. Blankets of green replace the frozen white of winter. Temperatures climb, and the hours from dawn to dusk stretch and lengthen with new hope and promise.

By May the landscape hums with life as the cycle of nature begins once again. Perhaps nowhere is this cycle more evident than on the province's numerous wetlands where thousands of waterfowl and shorebirds breed and raise their young.

For the piping plover, a vulnerable shorebird that spends its fall and winters in Texas, the gravelly shores of these prairie wetlands are home during their northern sojourn, which stretches from May to late August. On the shores, the birds scratch no-frills nests, tend to their young and forage for food.

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Habitats in danger

Piping plovers breed in three distinct locations in North America: the Northern Great Plains or Interior Region, the Great Lakes Region, and the Atlantic Coast or Eastern Region. Of these, the Northern Great Plains is by far the largest of the three populations, with 26 percent of the continent's piping plovers nesting in the Canadian Prairie provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba, the three jurisdictions in the North American Waterfowl Management Plan's Prairie Habitat Joint Venture. In all locations, however, the birds' numbers have declined. In 1985, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service classified the Great Lakes population as endangered and the Northern Great Plains and Atlantic Coast populations as threatened. (The piping plover is considered endangered in Canada.)

The piping plover is a small, stocky shorebird about the size of a robin. Its color ranges from pale brown to grey -- the perfect camouflage for pebbled beaches. The plover constructs a nest by scraping a shallow depression on the shore and lining it with small pebbles. The female usually lays four buff-colored, speckled eggs. Both adults share incubation until the chicks hatch about 30 days later. Adults and young alike feed on the shoreline close to their nest. They make short dashes across the sand, stopping to retrieve insects or worms that have been washed onto the surface of the shore.

On the Great Lakes and Atlantic Coast where the number of people pursuing leisure activity has increased, the bird's shoreline breeding territory has been increasingly disturbed by people, dogs and a growing variety of water craft and all-terrain vehicles. On the Northern Great Plains, where the waterbodies are often smaller and sometimes alkaline, the problem is a more fundamental one: loss of wetland habitat.

Since the time of first settlement in Saskatchewan, an estimated 40 percent of the Northern Great Plains' wetlands have disappeared due to drought and agricultural development. This has had a profound effect on some species of waterfowl and shorebirds whose decreasing numbers have mirrored the decline in their wetland habitat.

The situation is not unique to Saskatchewan or the Canadian prairie provinces. It's a pattern common to the entire continent. To begin to seriously address these concerns, the United States and Canada signed the North American Waterfowl Management Plan in 1986, an unprecedented agreement to protect and rehabilitate wetlands and increase wetland wildlife numbers.

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"Habitat and healthy ecosystems are the common denominator, needed by all species, including our own. Through its partnership approach, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan is helping provide those healthy ecosystems on a continent-wide basis," said Mollie Beattie, Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "The piping plover is an excellent example of the umbrella effects of the Plan. It demonstrates that when you do something for ducks, you're also doing something for a wide variety of species -- from butterflies to bald eagles."

Planning for the bird's future in Saskatchewan

In Saskatchewan, activities of the Plan are coordinated by the Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation (SWCC). Dr. Dave Duncan, Manager of Biological Services with SWCC, explains the unique requirements of the piping plover and how some programs might benefit the shorebird.

"Piping plovers are very specific in their habitat requirements. Other birds are more flexible and adaptable, but the piping plover needs a large gravelly shoreline with sufficient food and water for nesting -- only that will do."

That, he says, is a distinct disadvantage when shorelines change, or worse, disappear. "We're concentrating on three solutions right now: One, keeping cattle off the shorelines; two, improving water supplies in traditional plover nesting areas; and three, preserving some key habitat parcels."

Unlike many of the shorelines of the Atlantic Coast or Great Lakes, most of Saskatchewan's lakes and wetlands are not crowded with sunbathers or sports enthusiasts. They are, however, often host to cattle. Saskatchewan is a farming province so it's not uncommon to see cattle watering by the sides of marshes or sloughs. The traffic of hooves can play havoc with piping plover nesting. If the shoreline is kicked up early in the season, vegetation takes root and birds avoid the area. If it's during the nesting season, cattle trample nests or create large depressions in the shoreline into which chicks fall and can't get out.

One solution is fencing off key nesting areas to prevent cattle from reaching the shoreline. SWCC is fencing approximately 20 miles of shoreline, which the corporation is acquiring in the province's Missouri Coteau and Quill Lakes area. (Big Quill Lake provides breeding habitat for three percent of the continental population.) Private landowners who fence off shorelines are acknowledged by signs on their properties.

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Who says you can't fool Mother Nature?

The creation of small wetlands near traditional nesting beaches is a second key initiative. At Big Quill Lake, drought has left the lake a fraction of its original size, and the water's edge is now miles from the original shorelines.

Three years ago, an artificial gravel-covered nesting pad was built to bring the birds closer to water. Last summer, a different way was tried to bring the water closer to the birds. "The birds still nest on the old shoreline, even though the water might be a mile away," Dr. Duncan explains. "The young need food and water to survive, so we drilled wells to bring water up to the surface. This created small wetlands near the original shoreline which provided foraging areas to help the young birds survive."

Other measures are also underway in Canada to protect the piping plover. A recovery team appointed by the Canadian organization RENEW (Committee on the Recovery of Nationally Endangered Wildlife) is studying the bird's nesting area on Lake Diefenbaker, a man-made reservoir fed by snowmelt in the Rocky Mountains. At that lake, water levels can be low in the spring and high in the late summer, creating problems for nesting birds. The team has hired a graduate student to research the piping plover's nesting habits and identify possible solutions to the problem of varying water levels.

The piping plover habitat project was funded by The Nature Conservancy, Wildlife Habitat Canada, Kansas Parks and Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Canadian Wildlife Service, and Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation and a matching grant from the North American Wetlands Conservation Fund.

The forces of drought and development have jeopardized the piping plover's ability to at least maintain its number and, at best, increase them. Safeguarding its breeding habitat is the best way to ensure safety in numbers for the piping plover. However, the commitment of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan partners in Saskatchewan and elsewhere may mean a change for the better for this vulnerable shorebird.

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Note to Editors: This feature news release, written by Elise Stoesser, may be used in whole or part.